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# WORK AND WORKS

BY STEPHEN GWYNN

HARDLY anything in creation is more overworked than the word "work" itself. It has more to do than any monosyllable, however solid and sonorous, could hope to accomplish. The French, who subtilize so happily, are in this respect better provided with two variants; yet even so, instinct compelled them to introduce a further resource by giving the same noun two genders for its different but related meanings. Yet for all that, I would defy the subtlest Frenchman to give a clear and coherent exposition of what is meant by "work," divided into what is expressed by *œuvre* in the masculine, *œuvre* in the feminine, and *ouvrage*. The matter is too complex. Nothing is more concrete than work, nothing more abstract; nothing more personal, nothing more impersonal, according to the sense in our minds. The work may be there, visible, tangible, efficacious; the man who made it, who did it, vanished, extinct, forgotten, really unimaginable, these thousands of years; yet who can separate in imagination a man and his work, if the word work is to bear its full significance? The work is the man—and yet is not all the man. He ought to be master of it. If the man is not expressed in work he is a man without meaning and useless. But if his life goes out in work over which he has no control, then it is not his work, he is its slave.

"Wage slaves" are slaves of someone else's work. A man can make others sell their bodies to his work; it has been done by thousands to millions, for no one seriously denies that there has been economic slavery under the name of freedom. The word "work" has been used where "task" gave the true meaning. "Work" belongs to the free laborer. Yet it is extraordinarily difficult to enserf a human being completely, and many a bond-slave to the task of others has found room to express his nature in works of his own freedom. Joubert has a phrase which illustrates this distinction

and also the advantage which French writers have for expressing it: *Tout homme doit être l'auteur, si non de bons ouvrages, au moins de bonnes œuvres*. He adds a sentence which shows that in saying this he thought only about persons of quality. *Il ne suffit pas d'avoir son talent en manuscrit et sa noblesse en parchemins*. A claim to distinction, in short, must justify itself by good work or good works. Joubert probably regarded the undistinguished as material upon which suitable candidates for distinction might distinguish themselves; he did not realize that humanity is an obligation just as strong as nobility or that good works are at least as frequently performed by those who claim neither rank nor talent as by those who do. What he did see is that a man should express his being somehow, whether in good work or good works. It is quite possible for the man who becomes a slave to someone else's work to lose all power of finding this expression. When the routine was to be up daily at five in order to sign on at six for your place at a machine, coming home at six in the evening left space for little but to eat and sleep that you might not be late next morning. A man or woman living this life may have been doing good work in a sense, helping to produce cheaply for humanity something that humanity needed—pins, for instance. Yet nobody, I think, could say that the result in work justified the kind of existence: and certainly no such worker of this kind ever pretended that he was living in this way for the work's sake.

That claim comes from quite another quarter—from those who of their own choosing become slaves to their work: who sacrifice to it not only themselves but those nearest to them. There are two ways of lowering the standard of living, and a man is certainly justified in inflicting upon himself material privations that his work may gain; perhaps also, in inflicting them on others who voluntarily accept his purpose. It is customary to applaud the artist or the missionary who in pursuit of an ideal brings his family to the brink of starvation. Yet before giving the applause, one should be very sure about two things—first, that the ideal is worth while; secondly, that the family are consenting parties. Let us omit the consideration that common prudence advises another course;—common prudence, if it had

been listened to, would have left us a very backward universe. But it should never be forgotten that the feverish pursuit of work "for work's sake" is in one aspect a ferocious egoism. Consciously or not, it is an effort after external realization of one's own personality. I set aside again the vulgar case of a gluttonous worker who pursues merely the rewards of success. But the general, the statesman, the stockholder, the artist, each feels the thrill when the desired effect begins to develop in his field of action.

Nature doubtless knows her business, but a man cuts a poor figure when he finds at last that he has been unkindly chasing a shadow and neglecting the substance—which was, if nothing else, the doing of kind things. Anyone who has followed politics can accumulate instances of those who for the sake of a political enthusiasm spoil their own lives and the lives of others and achieved nothing, yet who were, by the common standards, disinterested persons. They wanted, that is, nothing but the work they chose—nothing but the attempt to realize their vision in some form outside their imagination. In the hope to do this, which they could not do, they left much undone that it would have become them to do. There are others, too, great workers, who by a passion of concentration that has made them hateful to live with, have actually done something—achieved perhaps what will represent two lines in a history book, a science primer, a record of engineering. How does their work compare with the works which they neglected, for which they found no leisure? The best work of all, after all, is a life and very few of those whom I have known laboring thus inhumanly, slaves to a self imposed task, seem worth one very simple gentleman, a soldier who has worked all his life, and enjoyed his work, yet never brought to it the least touch of egoism; who works now a happy and capable farmer, with all imaginable zest, yet will always on any fair occasion leave the work that is his main interest for calls of courtesy or kindness or even mere good comradeship.

So to work as not to cease to be a gentleman is a modest precept, and it certainly does not bar a man from bearing hard on himself or on others. But it bars egoism. There is no limit to the service that a man will get, to the help he may have in his work, provided that he can make his helpers feel that the work is

theirs, not his only. Those who care most for the work to be achieved and least for the realization of their own personalities in it, must surely win this devotion; it is the reward they earn. Acceptance may be the supreme giving; for the worth of a gift lies not in its exchangeable value but in the way of giving, and there is no greater gift than to admit another to partnership. Great captains of all kinds have always had the secret of multiplying their power by thus extending and communicating their personality. If you think your work worth dying for, and are ready to die for it, there is no egoism in letting someone else die for it instead. But the claim that for your work's sake you may do what lowers the standard of your nature, and ask or accept from others a similar sacrifice, runs, I think, against the supreme human interests by which the value of all work must be tried. There are things which every man confronted with them knows to be dishonorable. You cannot discard honor temporarily. Is it even worth while for the sake of any result achievable to abolish honor? Napoleon certainly thought so. That may be why he succeeded. Or it may be why he failed.

It all comes back to the question whether being or doing is the supreme end. Your work is the realization of yourself, of the forces that are in you, outside of yourself; it is your doing. Your "good works," or the most precious of them, are not so deliberate; they involve small effort or none; they are oftenest the natural issue of companionship; they are sympathy in some easy manifestation; they proceed almost automatically from your being. If your existence is all merged in the effort to externalize itself, there will be none of them; your self will have no time to be aware of other selves, save as material to be utilized.

Of course there is a case to be made for the supreme efficiency of utter concentration on a purpose. This, however, at least is true. You may be admired for your work; it is for your works you will be loved to the last. The most endearing of all records are the little kindly things told and remembered of men who with all their greatness found time to be lovable.

STEPHEN GWYNN.